

The Prophet Muhammad said "it is the duty of every Muslim man and woman to seek education," and under his influence, the Arabs were encouraged to pursue knowledge for its own sake. Fulfilling the duty to pursue knowledge gave Muslims a head-start in education. Among the early elementary educational institutions were the mosque schools which were founded by the Prophet himself; he sat in the mosque surrounded by a *halqa* (circle) of listeners, intent on his instructions. Hazrat Muhammad also sent teachers to the various tribes to instruct their members in the *Qur'an*. The formal pursuit of knowledge had existed in one form or another since the time of the Greeks. The Arabs translated and preserved not only the teachings of the Greeks but those of the Indians and the Persians as well. More importantly, they used these basic teachings as a starting point from which to launch a mass revolution in education beginning during the Abbasid dynasty (750-1258 A.D.).

MADRESAS BEGAN IN MUSJIDS During the Abbasid period, thousands of mosque schools were established throughout the Arab empire and the subjects of study were increased to include *hadith* (the science of tradition), *fiqh* (jurisprudence), philology, poetry, rhetoric and others. In tenth century Baghdad alone there were an estimated 3,000 mosques. Fourteenth century Alexandria had some 12,000 mosques, all of which played an important role in education. In the mosque school, the teacher sat on a cushion and leaned against a column or wall as his students sat around him listening and taking notes. Only Muslims were allowed to attend the *Qur'an* or *hadith* sessions, but non-Muslims could attend all other subjects. There was no age limit, nor were there any restrictions on women attending classes. Arab women excelled in medicine, mysticism, poetry, teaching, and oratory.

In the mosque schools, rich and poor alike attended classes freely. Classes were held at specific times and announced in advance by the teacher. Students could attend several classes a day, sometimes traveling from one mosque to another. Teachers were respected by their students and there were formal, if unwritten, rules of behaviour. Laughing, talking, joking or disrespectful behavior of any kind were not permitted. Different teachers used various methods of instruction. Some preferred to teach from a text first and then to answer questions. Others allowed student assistants to read or elaborate upon the instructor's theories while the teachers themselves remained available to comment or answer questions. Still others taught without the benefit of texts.

THE FIRST MADRESA WITH BOARDING In 1066 A.D., Nizam al-Mulk, a Seljuk vizier, founded the *Nizamiyya Madrasa* in Baghdad which became the forerunner of secondary/college level education in the Arab empire. *Madrasas* had existed long before Nizam al-Mulk, but his contribution was the popularization of this type of school. The *madrasa* gave rise to various universities in the Arab empire and become the prototype of several early European universities. Founded in 969 A.D., Al-Azhar University in Cairo preceded other universities in Europe by two centuries. Today it attracts students from all over the world. The *madrasas*, which literally mean "places for learning," were the beginning of departmentalized schools where education was available to all. The *madrasas* even provided student dormitories. Each *madrasa*, depending on its location, had a specific curriculum. The subjects taught were the religious sciences (*e.g.*, the study of the *Qur'an*, *hadith*, jurisprudence and grammar) and the intellectual sciences (*e.g.*, mathematics, astronomy, music and physics). As these schools began to attract distinguished teachers and specialists from all corners of the Arab empire, the number of disciplines increased. Teachers received substantial salaries and scholarships and pensions were available for students. Funds for operation of the *madrasas* came from both the government and private contributions. Since the government placed an important role in promoting these institutions, the subject matter, choice of teachers and allocation of funds were closely supervised and regulated. The development of the *madrasa* evolved from the various elementary and secondary schools which were prevalent in the Abbasid empire: the mosque schools and other traditional institutions; *maktabat*, or libraries, which originated in the pre-Islamic Arab world; tutoring houses, palace schools; *halqa*, discussion groups in the homes of Muslim scholars; and the library salons in the palaces of wealthy men and courtiers who were patrons of learning and scholarship. In addition, there were the *majalis* or meetings which were presided over by learned men at various social institutions and private homes. The *majalis* covered a wide range of topics and subjects. In the current revivals of traditional Islam, many of these "old" institutions and customs are being resuscitated. Traveling to other cities to seek knowledge under the direction of different masters was a common practice in the early centuries of Islam. From Kurasan to Egypt, to West Africa and Spain, and from the northern provinces to those in the south, students and teachers journeyed to attend classes and discuss social, political, religious, philosophical and scientific matters. The custom was later popularized in

Europe during the Renaissance. Academies began to emerge in the eighth century, serving as centers for the translation of earlier works and for innovative research. Each academy provided rooms for classes, meetings and readings. The *Bayt al-Hikma* for the Caliph al-Ma'mun (813-833 A.D.) and the *Dar al-'Ilm* of Cairo founded by al-Hakim (966-1021 A.D.) are the most notable. Books were collected from all over the world to create monumental libraries that housed volumes on medicine, philosophy, mathematics, science, alchemy, logic, astronomy and many other subjects. Along with the introduction of paper and textbooks in the eighth century came the antecedent of "teacher certification." An instructor would give his permission (*ijazah*) to competent students to teach from one or all of his textbooks. Because of this practice, an individual could have an *ijazah* to teach a subject although he might be a *student* in another class. Consequently, the distinction between teacher and student was often minimized. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, as Arab influence spread to Spain, Sicily and the rest of Europe, Europeans became increasingly aware of Arab advancements in many fields, especially education and science. Books were translated from Arabic into Latin and, later, to vernacular language. European schools which had long limited learning to the "seven liberal arts" began to expand their curricula. For some five hundred years, Arab learning and scholarship played a major role in the development of education in the West. The Arabs brought with them well-developed techniques in translation and research and opened new vistas in areas of medicine, the physical sciences and mathematics. Application of empiricism in all fields of study was rapidly incorporated into the learning system of those who became familiar with Arab methodology. Long before the popularization of the phrase "transfer of technology," a term used to describe advanced expertise which developed nations offer to Third World countries, the Arabs shared their accumulated knowledge and institutions with the rest of the world.